



Centre for Teaching Excellence
Ionad Sàr-mhathais ann an Teagasg

Practitioner enquiry in rural settings: a place conscious and collaborative approach

Research Brief

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Introduction

Scotland has a diverse and varied landscape, with a third of schools being classed by the Scottish Government as ‘rural’ (2025). Yet despite this, current models of professional learning can be generic and urban-centric, or approaches to rural and island education through an urban lens (e.g. Dick and Peat, 2022), without reflecting the professional learning needs of rural and island teachers (e.g. Dowling, 2009; Redford and Nicol, 2021; Dick and Burns, 2023) or the unique challenges they face in developing their professional capital (Coker, 2019). It is therefore essential to identify appropriate pedagogical tools and approaches to improve practice and learner outcomes that work in rural and island settings. This includes identifying how best to approach practitioner enquiry.

Practitioner Enquiry, as a ‘transformative tool for educational change and innovation’ (Kennedy *et al*, 2025a, p. 2) is intrinsically linked to the learning community where it is carried out. This learning community, while entangled in ‘stretched out relations’ (Massey, 1994, p. 11) with other schools, agencies and government bodies, is fundamentally unique. An approach to enquiry is therefore needed which allows practitioners to simultaneously see the bigger picture of the Scottish context, yet to draw on the circumstances of the individual setting. In order to support rural practitioners to take this simultaneous view, this brief proposes first, a place-conscious approach to enquiry that pays attention to the individuality of learning communities and the impact of location and second, how enquiry networks can support colleagues to collaborate, build capital and consider, among other things, their role in the wider context of Scottish education.

While we use the term rural, it is with a recognition that these communities are not generic, and while sharing common features, rural and island schools can be as different to each other as urban schools. We also support a move beyond an over-simplified and binary logic of rural/mainstream, connected/isolated approach in the Scottish landscape (Paterson *et al*, 2024), taking into account the positioning of small towns which suggests more of a continuum than a straightforward city-countryside divide (Wilkie *et al*, 2026) as well as acknowledge the subjectivity of these constructs.



Definitions

Practitioner Enquiry

There are varying definitions of enquiry which rest between two distinct approaches: *enquiry as a stance* (Cochrane-Smith and Lytle, 2009) which includes a continual process of critically informed questioning together with enacting and evaluating change to improve outcomes for learners, and a more tangible *investigation or ‘finding out’* (Menter *et al*, 2011) which can be justified and defended, with a particular focus on sharing the findings to ensure it beyond a personal reflection to shared knowledge. Hall and Wall argue that the two should not be seen in opposition but as a ‘dynamic interaction between a desire to question practice and a systematic approach to finding out the answers’ (2019, p.8). For further information see CfTE Research Brief:

[Practitioner Enquiry as Professional Learning for Improving Teaching](#)

Professional capital

With its roots in Bourdieu, professional capital is broadly concerned with how the knowledge, skills and experience you acquire due to your particular set of circumstances impact your ability to carry out your role. Professional capital comprises three elements: *human capital*, which is the qualities, qualifications and competencies of an individual; *social capital*, which focuses on relationships and how teachers can work as a team or group to access knowledge and improve their skills and *decisional capital*, which focuses on individual decision and making ‘sound judgements’ (Hargreaves and Fullan, 2012, p. 93) based on the expertise and wisdom gained in the role.

Place-based education

A consideration of place is a complex and multifaceted, with varying nuanced terms, including place-based (e.g. Yemini, 2023), place-conscious (e.g. Gruenewald 2003) and place-responsive (e.g. Lynch and Mannion, 2021). Place-based education can be considered a broad, umbrella term which encompasses a wide range of practices which ‘prioritise experiential, community-based, and contextual/ecological learning to cultivate greater connectivity to local contexts, cultures, and environments’ (Yemini *et al*, 2023).

A place conscious approach to enquiry: a focus on the school

For professional learning, and in turn enquiry, to be most useful, it must be considerate of the unique attributes and challenges facing schools, and the everyday roles of teachers, brought about by their locations (Dick and Burns, 2024, Constantinides, 2026). There is more to location than simple geography – there are numerous factors impacting settings, be it economic, cultural, psychological among others (Yemini *et al*

2023). For rural educators for example, teaching multi-composite classes requires an in-depth knowledge of the curriculum at multiple stages, a resourcefulness in the face of limited resources, having to wear multiple hats, not only in their role as educators but also potentially as residents in the communities in which they serve. This more autonomous way of working brings greater agency, and creativity in how they manage the curriculum and opportunities for innovative and responsive teaching (e.g. Redford *et al*, 2025).

A place conscious approach to enquiry could acknowledge the complexities of teaching in rural settings, highlighting that ‘places themselves have something to say’ (Gruenewald, 2003, p.624). Guenther *et al*, reflecting more widely on what is rural education research, suggest that ‘knowledge production ... must be grounded in the knowledge of the place where it is created’ (2026, p.vi). Drawing on place-based education, this place conscious approach is in response to the ‘increasingly placeless institution of school’ (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 620) or ‘placenessness’ (Yemini *et al* 2023, p. 641), and can be seen in the homogenised, urban-centric, one size fits all approach that can be seen throughout policy (e.g. Beck and Shannon, 2025; Constantinides, 2026). This disconnect, stemming from ‘processes of globalisation and mobility’ (Yemini *et al* 2023, p. 641), does not work for a landscape such as Scotland with dramatically different localities and lived experiences of learners, as ‘education for everywhere ... becomes education for nowhere’ (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 629).

What does this look like in practice?

There is a growing body of international evidence recognising the importance of a place conscious approach in professional learning. In Scotland, this can be seen in the Initial Teacher Education programmes in the Highlands. In the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI) PGDE enquiry programmes, they draw on the pillars of Arctic Pedagogy and take a ‘place-attentive’ approach, recognising the importance of ‘equipping student teachers with the skills to identify the priorities and uniqueness of each school community’ (Lindley-Highfield and Hepburn, 2025, p. 319), where students are encouraged to find out about and make connections with place to enhance their teaching and learning. Examples include one student, whose school was located on a river, utilising the feature in their teaching to engage and motivate learners and ‘promote issues of social justice and sustainability through local frames of reference’ (Lindley-Highfield and Hepburn 2025, p. 322).

Redford and Nicol, also from the UHI, talk about developing teaching identity through a ‘critical pedagogy of place’ (2021, p. 47) in their PGDE programme, which they highlight has been developed by ‘inherently rural’ providers ‘located *here* and not *there*’ (2021, p. 50). They propose that students develop their own ‘place-mediated’ identity through

their lived rural experiences and journey to becoming a teacher. This subtle shift in the view of rural as a way of being, as opposed to as a 'distance from Urban Centre' (Scottish Government, 2025), encourages the use of "place conscious pedagogies" to develop place conscious teachers' (Redford and Nicol, 2021, p. 61). Walker and Walker, building on their research in a coastal town in northern England, suggest that connecting with communities, recognising the impact of place on both learners and celebrating what is unique opens up 'local ways of knowing [and] affords the opportunity to re-imagine educational futures' (2023, p. 113).

A place-conscious approach to enquiry could involve the consideration of the following questions:

- Are generic approaches or interventions as effective as those tailored to individual schools?
- When reading research, what would be the challenges of applying this in my setting?
- What is unique about my learning community? How is it different to other schools?
- To what extent am I embedded into the wider community?
- How does my school culture and ethos impact my practice?
- The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation can be unreliable in rural areas. What other data or knowledge do I have access to?

Context, connectivity and capital: the role of enquiry networks

While a place conscious approach to enquiry acknowledges how place impacts practice, connecting with colleagues supports practitioners to reflect and see their practice in the context of the wider education system. Learning is a social activity (e.g. Bruner 1996, Philpott 2014) and the benefits of linking with colleagues in enquiry are well documented, for example the 'Principle of Connectivity' is one of Hall and Wall's (2019) four key principles of enquiry. What this network looks like should be decided by participants, be it a community of practice, critical friend group or a more collaborative approach to enquiry - see Kennedy *et al* (2025b) for definitions.

An enquiry network such as this would also support the development of professional capital. While teachers in rural and island settings have greater decisional capital, for example through greater autonomy in making everyday decisions, developing their social capital and human capital can be more challenging where there are fewer in-person opportunities for professional dialogue (Coker, 2019) and informal 'staff room' discussion and sharing of ideas, strategies and resources. A network bringing together colleagues with a shared understanding of the impact of location on pedagogy can support this capital, hence the success of initiatives such as the Scottish Island

Schools Network (SISN), an online community of practice set up to provide mutual support as well as a collective voice, where participants come together to share and subsequently generate new knowledge (Dick and Peat, 2022).

The communicative opportunities provided by technology, normalised during the COVID-19 Pandemic, is leading to 'dynamic re-imaginings' (Handscomb and Brown, 2022, p. 19) of professional learning networks and ways of working for rural and island educators however, care is to be taken as to how these are set up (Dick and Peat, 2022). Hybrid models in particular can be problematic - with the potential to increase any isolation felt by remote participants - as well as a recognition of the impact technology has in brokering relationships (Coker, 2019). While not without its limitations, including connectivity and supporting the skillset of participants (Beck, *in progress*) utilising technology to set up enquiry networks could support practitioners to take a place-conscious approach to enquiry.

Connecting to practice: joining a network

Practitioners wanting to join or create an enquiry network should consider the following questions:

- What do I hope to get out of joining an enquiry network? e.g. peer support, research skills, accountability etc.
- Are there any aspects of the enquiry process I would like to discuss with colleagues?
- What are the positives and the challenges of meeting with colleagues online?
- Brokering relationships can be different in an online space. How can I navigate this?

Next steps

- To listen to Mark Lindley-Highfield and Karen Warner talk about the place-attentive approach to enquiry taken by the University of the Highland and Islands in this CfTE online podcast [insert link when ready]
- To read more about identity of rural teachers read this [chapter by Redford and Nicol](#).
- For further information about place-based education, see this short [research review](#).

Reflexive questions

- * Should practitioners make connections with place in their practice? Why or why not?
- * What are the benefits of connecting with colleagues during the enquiry process?
- * How can we utilise technology to share practice and support rural and island teachers?

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